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Dykema, Peter William

A community Christmas

[Madison]

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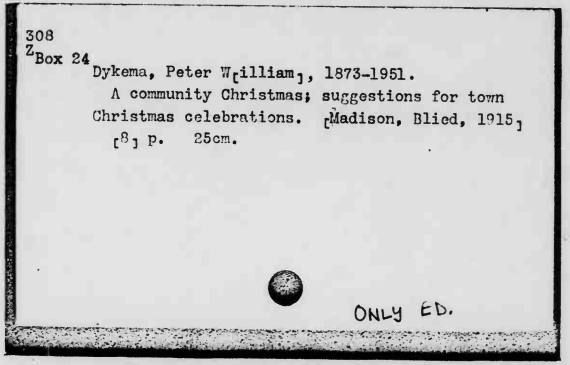

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"For 'tis good religion
On this festal date
That joy in each region
O'er all shulde haue swaye"
Old English.

Now Christmas comes, 'tis fit that we
Should feast and sing and merry be,
Keep open house, let fiddles play;
A fig for cold, sing care away.
From Poor Robin's Almanac, 1715.

A Community Christmas

Suggestions for Town Christmas Celebrations

By PETER W. DYKEMA.

University of Wisconsin.

I. *History and Significance of the Movement.*

The municipal Christmas tree idea is but three years old. From that first tree in Madison Square Garden, New York City, there however burst forth shoots which have taken root in more than 300 cities already and which promise to spring up in many more places this year. The idea which inspired the original New York tree was the impression left upon a woman by the experience of a young American related to her. As a student he had traveled in Germany and found himself as the holiday season came on, in the midst of the many preparations for the German home Christmas tree. Everywhere there was evidence of joyful celebration for others, but he walked the street alone and was constantly reminded of his being separated from all participation in the Christmas rejoicing. He soon found himself thoroughly homesick, and this led him to a resolve that if possible he should prevent others from having the same experience. "Next year," he said, "I shall get me a Christmas tree and invite all the lonely folk I know." The developments which followed are related in an article by Sonya Levien in the Survey for January 4, 1913.

"The woman who heard this young man's confession thought,—Why not a Christmas tree in a public place, with music and light for the lonely ones of New York? With faith in the young man's philosophy, she voiced her thoughts to a few friends and the response was immediate. It was decided to have a tree in the heart of the city, and Madison Square Park, the crossway of thousands of workers and the outdoor home of the destitute, was chosen. The plan was circulated among a few and contributions poured in from rich and poor for the "lonely ones'" Christmas tree, with earnest requests that the names of the donors should not be disclosed. The necessary funds were raised in forty-eight hours but donations continued, and the few who were in charge of arrangements found themselves embarrassed with unsolicited funds; this although the plan was strictly guarded against all publicity so that the tree would come unexpectedly, in keeping with the mystery of the season. An immense tree, sixty-six feet in height

was brought from the Adirondacks, and the Edison Company was asked for an estimate on the electric decorations. The estimate was sent, but with it came a representative to ask that the lighting be accepted as the company's contribution to the program. Every night from sundown to dawn the tree was kept alight with thousands of varicolored bulbs, thickly clustered in snow-capped branches and topped with brilliant Star of Bethlehem. Prominent singers and choirs volunteered to sing carols. The appreciative crowds the "Tree of Light" attracted—there were ten thousand people gathered around it at midnight, Christmas Eve—and the unanimous participation of the audiences in the songs, have given courage to many shy idealists, and festival plans for future holidays are rampant."

Although the idea which inspired this first tree was "Remember that there are others not so fortunate as you," the three years' history of the movement has already shown that many other ideas are now involved. It represents a definite step toward developing the social feeling of the community. There have been many movements of late years to organize and unify the community interests along the lines of government, of health, of recreation, and of business, but there have been few if any movements that had as their object nothing more tangible than the development of community social feeling, the establishing of a social tradition. A community Christmas tree does not aim to educate, to make more healthful, or to promote the business of any town. It desires simply to have people feel together that glow of kindliness and good will which we call the Christmas spirit. It in no way interferes with the home or the church celebration of Christmas with or without a tree. It says however that there is a social aspect to the Christmas message of "Peace on earth, good will toward men," of exalting the place of the child in our life, which is not properly taken care of by any celebration that is restricted to any group smaller than the community as a whole. The municipal Christmas tree is of course but one expression of the idea that the interest of each is the interest of all, but it is such an idealistic, forward looking conception, that it may well be used as the start for obtaining the more material and immediate ends which are the special object of good government. The Christmas spirit spread throughout the year, means the working together of the whole community for efficient government. The essence of the community Christmas tree idea is brotherhood.

The presence of the aspect of beauty in this Christmas celebration must not be overlooked. Many towns, through their charity societies, and such special agencies as the churches, salvation armies, and volunteers, have provided in the past and will continue to provide in the future, very substantial gifts in the way of food and clothing. Too frequently, however, there has been entirely missing from these donations the element of beauty. We have perhaps not realized enough in our country, the place of beauty in our lives. Material food alone produces a rather stolid type of individual. The beautiful Christmas tree may nourish many souls that are impoverished. It is quite possible that the memory of the resplendent "Tree of Light" may do more to help many people live as they would throughout the year than the over-eating at a Christmas dinner which in the past has too often been the only municipal Christmas gift.

For a person who wishes to read further on the question of the significance of the tree, the following two articles are recommended: "What the Tree in the Park Heard" in the Ladies' Home Journal for December, 1913, and "A Great Tree" by Zona Gale in Everybody's Magazine for December, 1913.

II. Decorations for the Community Celebration.

In what has been said above, reference has been made only to the tree because this is the center and focus of everything. Its effect, however, will be enhanced if there can be in the town, or at least in the neighborhood of the square in which the tree is placed, some subsidiary decorations. The three colors which may be used are green, typifying the new and eternal life embodied in Jesus, and the never ending procession of children coming into the world; white, typifying the purity and as yet undeveloped nature of childhood; and red, typifying the light and warmth which the returning of the sun at the winter solstice promises for the waiting world.

These three colors are of course most easily obtained in the green of the Christmas tree and vines, the red of the holly berry and the poinsetta flower; and the white of the mistletoe, the candles, and the dresses of the children. Within the last few years, however, most excellent counterparts of these effects have been obtained very inexpensively in many paper devices, from the folding bell to the extension wreath. In addition to these masses of color, much can be done by making little shields or placques in two colors consisting of a silhouette of one color pasted on the plain background of another color. Designs may vary and embody any of the numerous elements of the Christmas period such as the tree, the shepherd's crook, plum pudding, the sun, various toys, etc.

Whenever possible, the merchants should combine their resources in some simple scheme for decorating the business district. Nothing is more effective than bands of holiday green strung in loops, with wreaths of red at regular intervals. Each of the merchants will of course wish to have a particular decoration in his store, but all should be bound together by some general scheme. In every home there should be a wreath of holly in at least one window, with a gay, be-ribboned sprig on the door.

Nothing is more effective, however, in the way of decorations than lights, either the white and red electric bulbs, or candles. It is difficult to imagine a more cheery sight than a row of lighted candles burning in the windows of the homes on Christmas Eve. In every home there should be at least one window lighted with three or more candles.

III. Carolling.

These candles in addition to being a cheerful decoration may also serve as an indication that the inmates of the home will welcome any bands of carollers that may come this way.

In some cities it is the pretty custom to fill the late afternoon and night with the strains of wandering musicians. These may be the school children who under the guidance of their teacher spend the hours between the close of school and supper time in singing before the homes near the school building; it may be a group of young men who satisfy their desire to sing in the open by singing some of the jolly old Christmas carols; it may be a church choir or other choral organization which revels in the possibilities of showing that the message of music is rendered doubly beautiful when sung under the open sky. Whatever group it may be, this out-of-door singing is always a joy, and oftentimes it is a revelation. Hymns and carols that seem quite ordinary when sung in the church, Sunday school, or home, become really beautiful when sung in the crisp night just before Christmas. Any person who has not had the experience of listening or taking part in this carolling, or who is faint-hearted regarding the possibilities of it in these modern days, should read Thomas Hardy's charming story "Under the Greenwood Tree." In this book he describes the experiences of a country choir which year after year has tramped about on Christmas Eve singing the old carols and which does not allow its ardor in the singing and the belief in the message to be lessened even when some hard-headed farmer who is out of sorts, objects to having the quiet of the night disturbed. The songs which would be sung by these nightly visitors may include any of the fine hymns and carols that are particularly associated with the Christmas season. The seven songs which are mentioned below in connection with the ceremonies at the tree will be only a small part of the available carolling materials.

If the singers wish to add a touch of gaiety and color to their costumes, or if the night is so cold that it requires additional warmth, caps and hoods of scarlet may be easily procured or made. Lanterns or torches with candles or kerosene wicks will also be found useful and decorative. In some towns the singers even apparel themselves with masks and quite gay and elaborate costumes.

This carolling may include not only the homes of friends, but the residences of prominent officers and social workers, the hospitals, the jails, and especially, those poorer quarters of the city in which music is all too rarely heard. Any group of people with even mediocre voices may make a contribution to the Christmas season which will be welcomed on every side.

IV. The Tree.

The focus of the community celebration, however, is the big tree, which is erected in some prominent place near the center of the town, and which is intended for everyone. It differs from the home tree in that it is larger and its decoration is more elaborate, and especially, that it contains no gifts. Frequently, the tree is donated by some one individual or an association, put up by volunteer help, and is decorated by various contributions. In nearly every town the electric light company undertakes to wire it and to light it free of charge, In Chicago, the telephone company and the electric light company combined in the erection of a monstrous tree which had been contributed by a man in Michigan. The decorations vary in different places. There is always gleaming at the top of the tree a brilliant electric lighted star. The New York tree was called the "Tree of Light," and this name has been adopted in many places. In some of the larger cities, notably in San Francisco, instead of one tree there were several erected at important points throughout the city. Marshalltown, Iowa had three hundred tiny trees thruout the city. There is already a strong movement to utilize live and growing fir trees located in suitable places within the city instead of transporting from the forest a tree that has been cut especially for the occasion. This is an extremely desirable plan where there is a park properly located, for the presence of the tree throughout the year would be a continual reminder of the glory of the Christmas time.

In Dallas, Texas, a fine old giant oak in the public square was hung with many colored electric lights, and on Christmas eve, under its wide spreading branches, the people joined in the singing of Christmas carols, and were stirred to a finer appreciation of Christmas than they had ever known before.

V. Ceremonies at the Community Tree.

While the community Christmas tree will unaided shine forth with its message of brotherhood for several nights before and after Christmas, much will be added to the celebration if there can be one or two occasions when a little program is given. This may be simple or elaborate according to the weather conditions and the resources of the town.** If we were to return to the conditions of the Old English custom, there might be given the Nativity Play portraying the story of Joseph and Mary, their journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, and the flight into Egypt. The symbolical play or pantomime dealing with the Christmas message or with such ideas as the triumph of liberty and peace can also be worked out most beautifully. There may also be a program of recitations, music, and speeches.

**The following quotation from Zona Gale's story "A Great Tree" referred to previously in this bulletin is typical of the simple type of program, mention of which is made in the paragraph preceding the list of seven carols on page 7; some effects that may be obtained from such a program are also shown:

"When it was eight o'clock and there was enough gathered on the Square, they done the thing that was going to be done, only nobody had known how well they was going to do it. They touched the button, and from the bottom branch to the tip-top little cone, the big old tree come alight, just like it knew what it was all about and like it had come out of the ground long ago for this reason—only we'd never known. Two hundred little electric lights there was there, colored, and paid for private, though I done my best to get the town to pay for 'em like it ought to for its own tree; but they was paid for private—yet. It made a little *oh!* come in the crowd and run round, it was so big and beautiful, standing there against the stars like it knew well enough that it was one of 'em, whether we knew it or not. And coming up across the flats, big and gold and low, was the moon, most full, like *it*, belonged, too. "And glory shone around", I says to myself—and I stood there feeling the glory, outside and in. Not my little celebration, and your little celebration, and their little celebration, private, that was costing each of us more than it ought to—but our celebration, paying attention to the message that Christ paid attention to. I was so full of it that I didn't half see Ben Cory and his carolers come racing out of the dark. They was all fixed up in funny pointed hoods and in cloaks and carrying long staves with everybody's barnyard lanterns tied on the end of 'em, and they run out in a line down to the tree, and they took hold of hands and danced around it, singing to their

Springfield, Mass., gave a pageant depicting the birth of the Christ Child. The figures, in historically correct costume, took part in a program of carol singing and music under the great Christmas tree.

At Riverside, California, where fortunately for out-of-door celebrations, the thermometer on Christmas Eve registered in the neighborhood of 70 degrees, there was a very elaborate procession or pageant. "Fully 350 people marched in it through the park that night with Company M in the lead. As it passed in order the Boy Scouts were followed by the Campfire Girls; Heralds and Standard Bearers came next; next the Cantadores Club—a large company of male singers who were dressed in brown cossacks of the Franciscan order of Monks, hooded and girdled with white cord and knots, and carrying lighted candles; then came the St. Francis de Sales choir, and All Saints Episcopal Choir; school children of all nations; then the spirit of Christmas of the Woods; Christmas Girls; King and Queen of the Revels, Pages and Courtiers; the Wassail Bown was borne along next, then the Christmas Cake; Standard of St. George; Lords of Misrule and Courtiers; Indian Mummers and Indian Heralds. The air rang with melody and good cheer. There were solos and music by the Military Band, choruses in which the people joined, vocal solos and more music."

The simplest ceremony may consist of turning on the electric current at a specified hour and giving a number of musical selections. This music may be supplied both by special groups of people such as children from certain schools, the choirs of the churches, and singing societies of various kinds, and especially, by general community singing by all the assembled men, women, and children. For this purpose the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin offers its particular aid by recommending that the songs to be sung be chosen from the following seven:

1. O Come All Ye Faithful; Silent Night, Holy Night; O Little Town of Bethlehem; The First Nowell; God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen; Hark the Herald Angels Sing; A Carol for Christmas Day.

All of these except the last are readily accessible in most of the Christmas collections, many of them being in all the hymnals. The first five songs are found in a ten-cent collection called Adeste Fideles, No. I. of Christmas Carol Services, published by the H. W. Gray Company, 2 West 45th St., New York City. The sixth one is found in any hymnal, and the seventh one under the title "There Dwelt in Old Judea" is found in Noel, No. 6 of Christmas Carol Services, also published by the H. W. Gray Company. The words of this song are as follows:

A CAROL FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

I.

A day of joy and feasting
  Of happiness and mirth,
And every year it cometh here
  To gladden all the earth.
CHORUS.
Sing Noel, Sing Noel
  And merry be alway
Join in the song,
The sound prolong
  All on a Christmas Day.

II.

All Hail the shining holly
  All Hail the mistletoe
With carol gay all hail the day
  That cometh o'er the snow.
CHORUS.

III.

Long may the Christmas spirit
  Of kindness and good will
Through joy and pain with us remain
  Our hearts with warmth to fill.
CHORUS.

Free Band Arrangements for These Seven Carols.

The Extension Division has prepared copies of the band parts for all of these seven pieces for the following instruments:

Solo first, first and second cornets; first, second, and third clarionets; first and second trombones, first and second horns; flute; two baritones (bass and treble clefs), tuba, drums. By means of omitting some of the parts or by doubling others, this supply of music may be found adaptable to an organization of any size from twelve pieces up. These parts may be rented free of charge by any individual or organization in the state of Wisconsin on the same condition under which other packages are obtained, namely, the defraying of the return postage.

VI. Other Possibilities.

It is not within the scope of this bulletin to outline other types of community celebrations. They can merely be hinted at here. They would include the organization of the distribution of gifts, food, clothing, toys, etc., the making into a large community affair a great dinner, and possibly a great social gathering for the playing of games and other jollification. Suggestions for affairs of this kind will be readily found in books and articles dealing with Christmas parties.

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voices' top a funny old tune, one of them tunes that, whether you've ever heard it before or not, kind of makes things in you that's older than you are yourself wake up and remember, real plain. And Jerry Bemus shouted out at 'em: 'Sing it again—sing it again!" and pounded his wooden leg with his can. 'Sing it again, I tell you. I ain't heard anybody sing that for goin' on forty years.' And everybody laughed, and they sung it again for him and some more songs that had come out of the old country that a little bit of it was living inside everybody that was there. Then, just after the carols died down, the thing happened that we'd planned to happen: Over on one side the choirs of all the churches, that I guess had never sung together in their lives before, though they'd been singing steadily about the self-same things since they was born choirs, begun to sing—

Silent Night, Holy Night.

"Think of it—down there on the Market Square that had never had anything sung on it before except carnival tunes and circus tunes. All up and down Daphne St. it must of sounded, only there was hardly anybody far off to hear it, the most of 'em being right there with all of us. They sung it without anybody playing it for 'em, and they sung it from first to last. And then they slipped into another song that ain't a Chrismas carol exactly, nor not any song that comes in the book under 'Christmas,' but something that comes in just as natural as if it was another name for what Christmas was—'Nearer, my God, to Thee,' and 'Lead, Kindly Light,' and some more. And after a bar or two of the first one, the voices all around begun kind of mumbling and humming and carrying the tunes along in their throats, without anybody in particular starting 'em there, and then they all just naturally burst out and sung too. And out on the little flagstaff balcony of the Town Hall, Jerry Bemus stepped with his bugle, and he blew it shrill and clear, so that it sounded all over the town, once, twice, three times, a bugle-call to say it was Christmas. We couldn't wait till twelve o'clock—we are all in bed long before that time in Friendship Village, holiday or not. But the bugle-call said it was Christmas just the same. Think of it.....the bugle that used to say it was war. And the same minute the big tree went out, all still and quiet, but to be lit again next year and to stay a living thing in between."

VII. How to Go About It.

The practical details of working out these suggestions will vary greatly with the individual community. As has already been seen, frequently a single individual will have to start everything into motion, gradually uniting the efforts of many helpers. In other places, an organization fraternal or religious, may perform the same function. Certainly, in many towns by this time the idea will have gained sufficient importance so that a committee appointed by the mayor or the board of education will assume charge. But whatever the means, the ideas already stated will supply suggestions of results to be obtained, and the details can be worked out as are needed.

One of the best results of this Christmas celebration should be the bringing into the greeting of the New Year and the passing of the Old Year, a larger sense of decorum, reverence, of consideration for the significance of the event, than has obtained in many places. Just as Christmas Day should be welcomed by the sound of music, either human voices or splendid brass instruments at the stroke of twelve, so should the passing of the Old Year have a similar dignified greeting.

Madison, November, 1915.

Make we merry, both more or less,
For now is the time of Christemas.

Let no man come into this hall,
Groom, page nor yet marshall,
But that some sport he bring withal,
For now is the time of Christemas.

If that he say he cannot sing,
Some other sport then let him bring,
That it may please at this feasting,
For now is the time of Christemas.

If that he say he naught can do,
Then for my love ask me no mo,
But to the stocks then let him go,
For now is the time of Christemas.

F. C Blied Printing Company, Madison, Wis.

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